

Committee on Resources

Full Committee

Witness Statement

TESTIMONY OF WILLIE L. MOUNT
MAYOR OF THE CITY OF LAKE CHARLES, LOUISIANA
BEFORE THE COMMITTEE ON RESOURCES OF THE
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
MAY 3, 1999

Congressman Tauzin, members of the Committee on Resources, honored guests, ladies and gentlemen. It is my great privilege and honor to speak to you today as a representative of local government in a coastal area about the importance of the Conservation and Reinvestment Act of 1999 to coastal communities throughout our State and our nation.

The erosion of our fragile coastline is a national threat which is occurring incrementally and with deafening silence. As observed by Mark Davis in No Time to Lose: The Future of Louisiana, "Louisianians will face disastrous consequences as communities, jobs, and entire industries are reconfigured and abandoned. Commerce and communities throughout the U. S. will incur billions in unforeseen costs."

Coastal communities, better than anyone, understand the serious consequences of the loss of the wetlands. While challenged with these effects to land mass, fisheries, wildlife, and tourism, to mention only a few, coastal communities have been called upon to focus their resources on roads and other infrastructure to service the exploration industry because that industry has been so important to the economies of those areas.

This challenge points to the need for the assistance of the Conservation and Reinvestment Act. By resolving the oil and gas revenue distribution inequity nationally, the Conservation and Reinvestment Act provides for programs to address coastal restoration, provides funds to local governments to mitigate the impacts of offshore exploration, and supports funding for the development of additional recreation to improve the quality of life in our cities and parishes.

The experts will be presenting to you today great detail about the economic and statistical effect of the loss of our coastline. They will tell you about the staggering amounts of infrastructure that we stand to lose as a result of wetlands loss. They will tell you about the economic effects of coastal erosion on fisheries, on wildlife, on tourism, and on hurricane and storm impact and more. Allow me to add a human face to those statistics.

One of the most unique features of our great state is our marshes, wetlands, and coast. Generations of local residents join people who take up temporary residency to enjoy fishing, hunting, bird watching and other

recreational activities in a habitat that is unlike any other. Louisiana truly boasts a natural setting unlike virtually anywhere in the nation or the world.

Yet the communities of our wetlands are seriously threatened by coastal erosion. For example, the residents of the Holly Beach area along Highway 82 in Southwest Louisiana have the shoreline of the Gulf of Mexico at the highway as a result of coastal erosion. Let me say that again, despite the relocation of the highway and much reinforcement to protect its position, the edge of the highway is the shoreline of the Gulf of Mexico. That means that the highway is buffeted by every weather event that stirs up the Gulf of Mexico. Because the highway is on the last natural ridge, or chenier as we call it, before the marsh, loss of the highway would lead to interior marsh loss. As a result, the communities are facing relocation because their hurricane evacuation route as well as their means of conducting everyday business will be lost with the loss of the highway. While the economic loss of communities is overwhelming, the human loss is even more calamitous.

Let's look at another part of the state. The village of Cocodrie in Terrebonne Parish is entirely surrounded by marsh and there is no hurricane protection for the area. Home to recreational and commercial fishermen alike, Cocodrie is also the home to the Louisiana Universities Marine Consortium, a 75,000 square foot marine center with a replacement value of \$24 million. Cocodrie has a valuable and unique contribution to make to our state, our nation, and our world. The experts project that by 2050, over 55% of the marsh north of Cocodrie will be gone along with 65% of the marsh to the east; 35% of the marsh to the west and south will have turned to open waters. Should the community have to relocate, the economic impact of the infrastructure loss would cost up to \$53 million according to the Coast 2050 study. But even more importantly, our people, our State, our nation will have lost a precious and unique area forever.

Add to those communities the risks to numerous other areas in our state such as New Orleans and South Lafourche parish, and you see the potential economic, social and human toll to communities at immediate risk as well as neighboring parishes, our entire state and nation.

And the looming concern is that the human loss in the coastal parishes may be repeated over and over again, inching further and further inland, if the loss of coastline is not reversed. The effects are progressive and already are impacting areas some 100 miles inland. Neighboring communities such as ours are currently experiencing the effects on such features as transportation and flood and drainage capacity which depend heavily on the existence of the wetlands.

Or as the Coast 2050 report states, " The opportunity now exists to slow the loss of the wetlands, which will preserve the natural system while at the same time help these communities to continue to exist. It is a wiser decision to save the wetlands rather than to move communities or replace the infrastructure." The experts are telling us what we know intuitively, that sustaining and preserving our wetlands is crucial to the future of all communities in Louisiana.

Ladies and gentlemen, the Conservation and Reinvestment Act of 1999 is about fairness. It is about fairness to our coastal communities and parishes; it is about fairness to our State and other states to receive a fair share of the offshore revenues; it is about fairness to our people; and it is about fairness to the continuation of a way of life that is unique and precious to our State and our country. Thank you for your favorable consideration of this Act.

#